

Christmas I Year A 2025

So, I little bible study this morning. Put on your thinking caps. The only thing we really know about Jesus historically, that is to say, what we know corroborated by a card carrying historian... is that there was a wisdom preacher/teacher named Jesus who had a following in Galilee; who ended up in Jerusalem where he was executed by the Romans for sedition; crucifixion being the sentence for an insurrectionist. That's it. The rest is story. As a matter of fact, the figure of John the Baptizer got much more historical ink than did Jesus of Nazareth. But, of course, we know that Jesus's following continued beyond his death, and that it grew into a movement throughout the Mediterranean Basin, unbounded by the borders of Judea and Galilee, until it became the official religion of the Roman Empire entire. There were many such preacher types in the occupied territory of Palestine in the first century. What made this one special? What was it that so captured the imagination of the collective spirituality of the western world? It's a fascinating question. One that keeps scholars up late into the night.

We, the church, have as our authority the four Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, and a few letters opining on the faith from committed disciples of the movement... Paul and others. And we now know that there were many other Gospels and letters written concerning Jesus during the early centuries of the Common Era... but since the third century of the Common Era only what we have compiled in what is called the New Testament was deemed authentic and authoritative by the early church leadership. And I'll say it again, these Gospel accounts are not history, nor were they written as

history. They are theological interpretations as to the meaning of the life and ministry of Jesus and the movement he founded. And they are interpretations based on what the writers knew of their own traditions. I'm saying that scripture didn't come in a flash of light; scripture evolved. Scripture is grounded in history. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the so-called Synoptic Gospels... (Synoptic means "same lens," because these particular writers are all using a common source from which they are writing their own accounts.). Matthew, Mark, and Luke are decidedly Jewish. For them Jesus is offering a renewed interpretation of Torah, the Jewish Law. For them the Jesus movement is merely a revived expression of Judaism. In Luke and Matthew there are genealogies tracing Jesus's roots back through biblical history. These scribes are most concerned with connecting the Jesus movement with their tradition. Making it Kosher, if you will. Their Gospels are filled with allusions out of Jewish biblical history. In all three Gospels Jesus is in the desert for forty days, for example, a reference to the forty year sojourn of the Israelites in the Sinai desert as they made their exodus from slavery in Egypt; the phrase in Luke, "and a little child will lead them" is from Isaiah used to describe Jesus's birth... but the quote originally referred to Hezekiah, the boy king of Judea in the fifth century B.C.E.... and, born of a virgin. That's called typology. Jesus is the "type" for these writers that recurs again and again throughout biblical history. Israel has always expected a liberator, a messiah, to set things right; to, as respects their nation's viability, bring to fulfillment God's promises for their sustainability. That Jesus is the Messiah, one of the successive Sons of God to liberate God's people, is the common agenda among all three Synoptic writers. The term "Son of

God” is an honorific for the anointed leaders of Israel. But there is radical insight in their interpretations as well. Something new. They propose that equality, Justice, and empathy, those virtues taught and practiced by Jesus, are what liberates... liberates and sustains community. Liberation does not come by force or edict. Kings have failed them. Liberation comes by a people’s practice. liberation emerges from community. Matthew, Mark, and Luke differ in various points of view, but ultimately they agree that at the heart of a sustainable society is sacrifice for one’s neighbor; sacrifice for the good of the whole; Living under the rubric of mutual benefit in the face of power.

And then there is John’s Gospel. Today, as we do every first Sunday after Christmas, we read the prologue to John’s Gospel. John is radically different from the Synoptic Gospels... not opposed... but a completely different perspective. One might call the Synoptic Gospels a micro-view onto Jesus’s life and ministry; John’s view is macroscopic. John’s Gospel was so different that the early church fathers almost kept it out of the canon of scripture. The synoptic writers spend their time describing what Jesus does, and what Jesus says.... John speculates as to who Jesus is. The former uses rustic narrative action, while the latter is writing elegant philosophy, the nature of being. John’s prologue, I would argue, captures the philosophical Spirit of the age, making it perhaps the most visionary passage in the New Testament.

John, in the prologue, makes the startling claim that Jesus is of God; of the same being; present with and of God in the very beginning of time and space. None of the

synoptic writers being good Jews would dare to make such a claim. I want to believe that the story of Jesus made it into the great intellectual centers of the Mediterranean and inspired the imaginations of the scribes who wrote the Gospel of John to universalize the figure of Jesus, to connect him to the philosophical continuum of the academy, of classical philosophy. John uses Platonic categories to describe the Christ event. According to Plato, all forms on earth bear resemblance to the forms of heaven. All of creation represents God's self-disclosure. If we want to know what God is like, then we look no further than Jesus of Nazareth... who is God in human form. The same is true of nature... the cycle of death and rebirth. One may learn of God by reading the universe that surrounds us. Everything is Logos, the Word... everything represents, reflects God's 'reasonableness,' God's order, God's mystery. Plato didn't come up with this awareness from whole cloth; he learned it from the philosophical tradition; from Zoroastrianism; from Egyptian mysticism. John's purpose, not unlike the synoptic scribes who wanted to connect Jesus to their biblical tradition.... John's purpose was to connect Jesus to the very source of what we know; to our deepest knowledge. God's essence can be known in our humanity: Word made flesh. The human imagination is begotten of God's own creativity.

Another point, lost to the church, I'm afraid, is that John is not just speaking of Jesus as uniquely divine. Jesus is the archetype of all humanity. In this Gospel Jesus tells his disciples that they will do greater works than he; and (though not in the lectionary) that they are gods. This Gospel renders the Augustinian premise that humankind is depraved

and fallen absurd. We humans are of divine substance, sharing in God's likeness, bearing God's imaginative predispositions. To my mind that looks like the way of Jesus, the practice of sacrifice and love of neighbor... even the claim of immortality.

I am convinced that if the Gospel of John were left out of our canon; if the Synoptic Gospels were the only account of the life and ministry of Jesus, the cult of the Way, the Jesus Movement, would have disappeared, or would have been subsumed into Judaism, John's Gospel places the Jesus movement into the venerable discourse of orthodox philosophy, thereby giving it legitimacy, and exposure to the intellectual life of the culture. The tension between Jesus's divinity and Jesus's humanity became highly controversial in the early church. It evolved into an either or argument.... But both are true. To be human is to be divine. And that is not just true of Jesus. It is true for all of us.

So what do we do with such knowledge? The knowledge that we were in the beginning with God; and that we are light for the world; that we are Word... bearing God's mystery, God's life made flesh. That's what this mythological premise tells us. Thus we have a noble responsibility as God's progeny. The way of Jesus is our way; any other way is... at least, dishonest, an abdication of our true identity. Pray for courage good people, because courage it will take. We are given for the world's healing, for the raising up of the outcast, the poor, and the hopeless; and for those who live deathly lives. God is not whole until God's people are whole. The goal, if there be a goal, is not a perfect world; the prize

is gratitude and praise for those languishing in mute despair. In Christ we are compelled to meet this challenge... and the challenge begins as it always does.... Today.